IFS — 2nd Report from Vietnam

Remark on A Hotel Veranda

"At first you think you know but after two months, you're no longer sure what you're fighting for."

—Young soldier from Takoma, just out of the jungle, in Saigon for "R and R" (rest and recreation) April, 1966.

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What Vietnamese Say Privately in Saigon

The strategy of U.S. press relations in South Vietnam is that of the Warm Embrace. It is easier to get away from a bar girl on Nguyen Hué Street than from the loving arms of Press Chief Barry Zorthian's bureaucratic octupus for tenderizing (and ultimately digesting) the visiting correspondent. VIPs like Joseph Alsop get a broad view of the war from Gen. Westmoreland's own plane, or a specially prepared memorandum like that given Cyrus Sulzberger to confirm his worst suspicions of the recent protest movement in Hué and Danang. Everything is done to make it comfortable and easy to cover the war through official channels, and the most enterprising visitor soon turns from the exhausting task of penetrating the strange world and the strange tongues outside to the warm womb of the JUSPAO (Joint U.S. Public Affairs Organization) HQ.

The visitor can easily find most of his limited time consumed by official briefings and visits to show-pieces and battle scenes. Every effort is made to enlist the visitor emotionally in the war. I decided to keep away from the offer of field trips. I had no desire to compete with Hanson Baldwin. I wanted to get some idea of civilian politics and for this I wanted to talk with Vietnamese. I decided to stay in Saigon and try my luck on my own. In this installment I want to let a few of the Vietnamese speak for themselves.

A Catholic from The North

My most surprising encounter came early one morning while waiting for an appointment at a U.S. Aid Mission compound. An elderly Vietnamese to whom I smiled asked me in French if I knew any German. I said I knew a little. He brought out a grimy German primer in French and asked how I pronounced a certain word. I have forgotten the word but I cannot forget the conversation. It was so different from the American stereotype of what it should have been. Our conversation turned to politics. When I asked him to what party he belonged, he pulled a cross from under his shirt. He was a refugee from North Vietnam, a former landowner, who had lost one of his children, a two month old infant on the trek south in 1956 through jungle and over mountains. I expected him to be a bitter-ender. Instead, though employed by the U.S., and speaking in a U.S. mission, he was for peace.

He raised his hand, with the five fingers outstretched. "This," he said in French, "is a war of depopulation. Soon only one Vietnamese in five will be left. This is a war *sans issue*—with no way out. It would take two million soldiers for victory, and that is impossible." He ran his hand expressively down in front of his face. "It's all a question of face," he said. Then, in vivid pantomime, rolling up his pants leg and rubbing an aching stomach, he imitated the ragged and hungry guerrillas the U.S. was up against, but couldn't wipe out. "It's all a question of face," he repeated.

"We must return to Geneva," he said. He was for a cease-fire, for elections to be supervised by a UN force (he dismissed the currently scheduled elections cynically), and for a negotiated peace, to be followed by an American withdrawal. "In the cities," he said, "people don't like the Communists but don't want to be soldiers. In the countryside everywhere people are sad and unhappy. But here in Saigon" —and he grimaced—"many people are making money on the war. They are building apartment houses for the Americans. They'd like the Americans to stay for a hundred years." He shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of despair.

Can't Fool An Old Sea Dog Dept.

"I was impressed with Ky when he came here to meet the President. He is a smart little fellow. You cannot have wrong motives and be as patriotic as he is. He seems to have no desire to be a politician."

—Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, commander-in-chief Pacific, in an interview at Honolulu with Bob Considine, Baltimore News American, *May 8.*

"You Must Talk to The NLF"

Another surprise was an interview with a Vietnamese lawyer, a high official of the country's permanent civil service. I cannot identify him more closely. Like my Catholic friend, he was in despair over what the war was doing to his country. "There is no way out," he said, "except to recognize and negotiate with the National Liberation Front. It controls two-thirds of the territory and almost half of the people. In legal terms, this is physical sovereignty. It's a reality and peace can only be made by dealing with realities. Everyone wants peace but peace cannot be made in Peking or Hanoi. It must be made here. We must invite the NLF to the negotiating table."

We spoke together in one of those comfortably cool upper middle class villas with walled gardens where life goes on in Saigon much as it has for a generation despite the continued warfare. The lawyer was French educated, of wealthy family, a cultivated and witty man, unable to speak publicly—death or deportation is the penalty for peace talk. "It is obvious,"

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he said, "that the Front has grown stronger not weaker with U.S. intervention. According to your McNamara's own figures only 50,000 of the Front's 270,000 men are from the North. The forces against them outnumber them more than three-to-one yet the Front can withstand them. This is a reality which cannot be ignored."

He was against reunification. "The North is Communist. Our life requires a republican and liberal government," he continued. "If the U.S. recognizes the Front, invites it to a conference, and proposes a republican government, I believe the Front will accept this so long as the regime is non-aligned, and represents all political tendencies including the Communists. It would take 20 years to rebuild the South to the point where it was strong enough to confront the North in reunification. I would normalize trade and exchanges of all kinds. I would sell them rice and buy their cement and coal. But I would oppose even confederation at this time. If it can't be accomplished in Germany, how can it be accomplished here? The two systems are too different."

When I brought up the question of elections, I found my new friend skeptical. "Where would they be held?" he asked. "Only in the cities, and even in the cities of Saigon, Hué and Danang, the Viet Cong is strong. How can you have elections when three-fourths of the territory is not included?" Then he brought up another fundamental obstacle. "Communist and neutralist candidates are to be barred," he noted. "But who is to decide who is a Communist or a neutralist? This means that pro-war and anti-Communist candidates will be the only ones allowed to run."

"We Understand Each Other"

This civil servant relies on two factors to make a successful negotiation possible. "One," he said, "is that the war is impoverishing all of us, north and south. The other is that Ho and most of the Northern leaders like those of the National Liberation Front are Western educated and closer to us in outlook than they are to China. The Front is not entirely Communist but a national front, with many genuine nationalists in it. I knew Nguyen Huu Tho, president of the NLF, when we were in the university together. I remember when he began an anti-French movement in 1950. He was a real nationalist, not a Viet Minh. The leaders of the Front come out of the same milieu as ourselves. We understand each other. They want a democratic regime, neither Communist nor anti-Communist. We need a legal and civilian U.S.-backed regime here which can negotiate with the NLF." He envisaged withdrawal of U.S. troops only after negotiations, and he was against retention by the U.S. of its bases in South Vietnam. "You don't need them," he said. "The 7th fleet gives you a powerful offshore base."

Off the main streets in Saigon are smaller unpaved alleys lined by miniature houses for this miniature people. On one of them is a three story structure, again small by our standards, which houses Van Hanh University, a Buddhist school of higher learning. One of the heroes of its students and of the peace movement is a Buddhist Bonze who is also a poet, the Venerable Nhat Hanh. Some of his anti-war poems have been set to music and his latest volume of verses sold 4000 copies, enough to call it sharply to the attention of the police. They were given orders to pick up all the copies they could find in the bookstores. I had the pleasure of talking with him in his tiny apartment near the University. He represents not only a neutralist point of view—though this attitude seems pale and colorless beside his hatred of war and injustice—but of secularism in politics. "I'd rather speak as a Vietnamese than as a Buddhist," he told me. "I have many Catholic friends and we share a distrust of our own religious leaders." The group of intellectuals who gather about Nhat Hanh distrust the militant Buddhist leader Thich Tri Quang, for example. While U.S. sources—always prone to see Red in any opposition—regard Tri Quang as a Communist, these students think him more wrapped up in a confessional conflict with the Catholics than concerned with peace and national objectives.

Add Subversives at Work

"Anti-government leaflets were picked [sic] by a police patrol along Tran Quang Khai street, Tan-Dinh, Sunday at about 4 a.m. They were described as strongly hostile to the government and demanded 'food, clothes and democracy' for the masses."

—Saigon Post, *April 18.*

Thich Nhat Hanh's personal creed seems to be compounded of Buddhism and existentialism. His group published a little book last year called *Dialogue*. In it, in an open letter to the Rev. Martin Luther King, Nhat Hanh defended those bonzes who had burned themselves to death in the demonstrations which led to the fall of Diem. He wrote that Buddha in one of his former lives "gave himself to a hungry lion which was about to devour her own cubs." He said the self-burnings were not suicide but an act "of highest compassion" in order to call the attention of the world to the sufferings of the Vietnamese people. In his letter to Dr. King, Nhat Hanh wrote "Nobody here wants the war," and ended with a prayer which gives the flavor of his religious and philosophical outlook, "Lord Buddha, help us to be alert to realize that we are not victims of each other. We are victims of our own ignorance and the ignorance of others." He is a slightly built man of 40, who moves in an aura of modesty and serenity. He speaks English, for he studied the philosophy of religion at Princeton in 1961 and was a lecturer on Buddhism at Columbia in 1962-63. The students and younger faculty people who crowd his apartment look on him with reverence.

"Nobody can win this war," he told me. "Vietnam can only lose. The South Vietnamese and U.S. government speak of a social revolution but nothing can be done while the war is going on. The war undermines everything. It is too late for the Americans to realize a social revolution anyway. After seven years of American intervention, the Viet Cong are stronger than ever, and 200,000 American troops mean 200,000 *'bêtises'* [blunders, stupidities] a day, antagonizing people further.

"You cannot distinguish the VC from the peasants. Every day the number of peasants killed is far greater than the number of VC. Every day of war makes more VC. The first essential is a cease fire, then all else will follow. The VC prefer political to military means. I believe they would accept a cease-fire. They feel that the current peace moves are not genuine. The thing to do is to stop the bombings North and South, stop all offensive military action, and do it sincerely and the other side will reciprocate.

For U.S. Friendship and Aid

"Our real aspiration is to make Americans our friends not in war but in reconstruction, otherwise it will be very slow. The French built schools as a friendly memorial. You too must leave a good sentiment in Asian hearts."

The monk deplored a moral degeneration on both sides. "It is a shame for us and for all humanity," Nhat Hanh said, "that while war devastates the villages, here in Saigon people make money from the war. A new class of Vietnamese has been created who serve the Americans and profit from the devastation of their own country. They are men without culture or feeling. On the other hand most of the American soldiers here are not well educated, do not understand the Vietnamese and constantly offend. They sell watches to get girls. The people feel their country is being flooded with these foreign troops and controlled by them. This makes a very bad impression and gives VC propaganda its chance. This is why we are losing the war.

"In 1954 when Diem first came in, we had a chance to win. But the Diem government made too many mistakes. The

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Americans did not realize the psychological struggle and stressed mostly the military. The VC are very clever. They come to the villages in simple dress. They take care of babies, clean the houses and practice austerity. The government agents arrive beautifully dressed. They draw big salaries. They give orders and they withdraw after a few hours.

"The Americans," Nhat Hanh continued," instead of helping us to stand on our own feet, have made us more dependent, so that now we even have to import rice. On top of that, the intensification of the war and the bombing have made almost a million people homeless. In the refugee camps conditions are beyond belief. The refugees are supposed to get 7 piastres a day. A young man needs a kilo of rice a day. This costs 15 piastres in Saigon, but in the refugee camps because of the cost of transportation the cost of rice may go as high as 40 to 60 piastres a kilo. For 7 piastres all one can buy is a thin soup."

"It is hard to live with the Communists," the monk said. "They will not allow freedom of thought where they take over. But we must not despair, nor be too afraid of them. We have to face up to them and forge our own links with the people."

A Peace Corps of Their Own

Nhat Hanh and his group have organized a little Peace Corps of their own to work in the villages. It has established three camps where students work and live among the peasants. "The urban intelligensia," he said, "must earn the trust of the peasants." He himself was at one of these camps in a nearby area when the recent mortar attack on the airport took place. "We were not afraid of the VC mortars," he recounted, "but we were terrified by the U.S. plane raids which followed. The villages nearby suffered greatly."

He thought the Buddhists deficient when it came to social issues. "We consider ours a school for training youth in social service," he explained. "We follow the ideas of Gandhi and of Vinobha Bhave," the Indian who led a voluntary land redistribution campaign. Nhat Hanh feels that only by such grass roots work can his group hope to compete in peace with the Communists. "Remember," he said as our conversation ended, "nobody can win the war. It can have only one end—to destroy all Vietnam." In one of his most famous poems he wrote, "If we kill man, with whom shall we live?" Beyond politics and ideology, this is the simpler existentialist vision that moves Nhat Hanh and the young intellectuals gathered around him.

Every visitor tends to seek out the like-minded and therefore to discover what he hoped to find. The views brought back by pro-peace people like myself are therefore as apt to be skewed as those with which the U.S. bureaucracy comforts itself. I want now to report a quite different interview with an outstanding political figure, the famous Dr. Phan Quang Dan, who may yet play a leading, and perhaps unexpected, role in South Vietnam.

Dr. Dan became famous in 1959 when he was the one oppositionist elected to the National Assembly in Saigon in spite of an electoral law designed to return a rubber stamp legislature. He was barred from taking his seat on trumped up charges of violating the electoral laws. His life may serve to illuminate the complexities of Vietnamese politics, and some of the surprises which may lie ahead. Dr. Dan is a Northerner, born in Vinh in 1918, educated in Hanoi. While still studying medicine he began to work in the anti-French underground. He founded an anti-Communist and anti-colonialist paper in Hanoi after the war and refused offers of posts in two coalition governments set up by Ho Chi Minh in 1946. Instead after the agreement between Ho and the French he went into exile in China. He established friendly relations with the Kuomintang and became a political adviser to the exiled Emperor Bao Dai but broke with him in 1949 because Dr. Dan felt the independence the French offered was phony. He continued his political and medical career in exile, obtained a medical degree at the Sorbonne in 1949, and a master's in public health at Harvard in 1953. When Diem set up his first government in 1954 he offered Dr. Dan the Secretaryship of Social Welfare but Dr. Dan refused it. He came home next year, however, to organize work in preventive medicine, to set up a clinic for the poor which he still operates, and to organize a legal opposition. Dr. Dan was arrested in 1956 for criticizing the rigged elections for that year's Assembly. His opposition paper was blown up by Diem's secret police and finally suppressed in 1958. He was arrested again after the unsuccessful paratroop revolt of 1960. His luster was somewhat dimmed, I was told, when in his 1963 trial he recanted and praised the strategic hamlet program. But if this is true it came after three terrible years of imprisonment while awaiting trial, two of them in solitary confinement in a secret cell under the Saigon Botanical Gardens where he was savagely tortured.

Testimonial

"The VC can infiltrate and launch surprise attacks anywhere, even in the most strongly defended areas."

—Prime Minister Ky in Saigon Daily News *April 14 after VC shelled Tan Son Nhut airport.*

A Hero of The Resistance

Dr. Dan is one of the heroes of the democratic resistance. But Dr. Dan, as it turned out in my interview, is also an advocate of continuing the war to victory, and of sharply restricting democratic rights in the process. I interviewed him in the rather poverty-stricken clinic he operates off the crowded market place in suburban Gia Dinh. He is small, dynamic, intelligent, dark-eyed and fast-talking.

"I was quite surprised," Dr. Dan said, "to read in the papers that the Americans are worried lest the coming Constituent Assembly be dominated by Buddhists or neutralists. I think such an outcome impossible. I believe the elections

(*Continued on Page Four*)

"An American Friend" Advises War-Weary Vietnamese to Postpone Democracy

"I have tried to be objective and sympathetic over the recent increase in demonstrations, which purport to express concern for democratic government. In my view, the Ky government is doing a superb job of handling one of the most difficult assignments in the world. During the continuing crisis he deserves the maximum support. The people of Vietnam have been fighting some type of war for the last 25 years. They are weary of war, distrustful of each other, and the very foundations of society have been shaken.

"But this is the very time to rally for national unity. Patience! 'Better life is the most effective way to fight off Communism.' That is certainly true at certain stages of the struggle. But if it comes to bricks for the schools or arms for your defenders, the immediate choice—to live—is clear. Further, Democracy is in my view, another objective that is neither attainable immediately or even desirable (immediately). Democracy is predicated on an educated electorate and a broad middle class, and a consensus, if you will, of a basic mutual trust among the majority of citizens. I see none of these things in Vietnam.

"It appears the main thing the Vietnamese people agree they want is an end to the war. Am I now to suppose they hold the Americans responsible for the war?"

—Letter to the Editor by "An American Friend," Saigon Daily News, *April 23, abridged.*

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Will the U.S. Back Dr. Dan Next to Keep the War Going?

(*Continued from Page Three*)

will return a rightist majority and that the Left will be weak, as is natural in time of war against Communism. The picture has been distorted by the agitation of a few hundred teen agers in Saigon.

"The difficult problem will be the setting up of valid political organizations which can form a stable and workable majority government. If the Assembly is splintered, if no majority is possible, the elections will turn out to do more harm than good. At present, because of the long years of political repression, beginning with French rule, we have no real political parties. Religious groupings were tolerated because religion was thought not to be dangerous. So we have religious rather than political parties—Buddhists, Catholics, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao.

An Anti-Communist Coalition

"The Catholics are a well organized political minority in which the priests serve as cadres. The Buddhists, though a majority—I am myself a Buddhist by tradition—are divided into too many factions. The Buddhist Institute, so prominent in the recent demonstrations, is strong in Central Vietnam but not here. Not a single southern province joined their movement. The Southern Buddhists are not active politically. I believe the vote will be fragmented among these diverse religious groups and that if the Catholics, the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao and the Southern Buddhists can get together they can form a strong anti-Communist regime.

"The elections will provide a legal basis for the South Vietnamese government. Now everyone says there is no legal administration, only a self-appointed junta. After the elections it will be clear that the National Liberation Front represents very little and exercises control only by terrorism. There is nothing to worry about," he said, addressing me as if I were Ambassador Lodge, "The elections will make it much easier for the Americans. People will no longer be able to say this is a government of warlords."

I asked Dr. Dan whether it would be possible to have a free election without a free press. He thought there ought to be freedom of the press but with limitations. He thought the U.S. press printed too much military news. He would restrict this to official Ministry of War communiques. He also thought all pro-Communist propaganda should be barred.

"How to determine what is pro-Communist?" Dr. Dan said in answer to a question. "If someone talks in favor of Hanoi or against the Americans, I would bar that as pro-Communist. The Americans are our most important ally. Few Vietnamese are anti-American because they knew the U.S. has no colonial ambitions. I also would allow no candidate to speak for a negotiated peace. That would create confusion. I am not against asking Hanoi to withdraw its troops and then come to the conference table but I am against a cease-fire, for we are not the aggressors.

"The Buddhist Institute is ambiguous on all this. Sometimes it sounds as if it were for peace at any price. The Buddhists should remember what happened to Tibet—the most Buddhist country in the world—under Communist domination."

Ky Highly Regarded—On Formosa

"Taipeh (UPI)—The Nationalist Chinese would not make any official comment but is [sic] apparently pleased with Vietnamese Premier Nguyen Cao Ky's suggestion that the U.S. bomb the Chinese mainland. Ky was reported to have told Washington that [this was] the only way to win the Vietnamese war."

—Saigon Daily News, *April 15.*

More Optimistic Than Any American

Dr. Dan was more optimistic than any American with whom I spoke or any American of whom I heard. "We are much closer to victory than the Americans think," he said. "Basically our people are immunized against Communist propaganda. The inflation is not as serious as some contend. After all we do have full employment. Now if we get a strong administration, and get ahead with pacification, the war can be won in a relatively short time. Peace will come not through negotiations but through military victory."

The French tried operating through a puppet monarch, Bao Dai. We tried operating through a Mandarin dictator and then a series of military regimes. We have yet to play the card represented by Dr. Dan; some Americans are already talking of this as our next move. It could open a fresh period of suffering and disillusion.

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